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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 HANOI 001210

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

FOR ADMIRAL WILLARD, COMPACFLT COMMANDER

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OTRA](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR ADMIRAL WILLARD, COMMANDER, U.S. PACIFIC
FLEET

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Introduction

¶1. (SBU) Embassy Hanoi looks forward to welcoming you to Vietnam. Your visit is well timed to follow up on the recent U.S.-Vietnam defense dialogue and to highlight a broad area of bilateral defense and security cooperation that has now begun to gather momentum in the wake of Vietnamese Prime Minister Dung's June visit to Washington. Vietnam's economic successes have translated into greater international clout, reflected in its current seat as a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. GVN leaders understand that the United States plays a direct role in creating the conditions for their nation's success and are committed to advancing the bilateral relationship.

¶2. (SBU) Our strengthening relations are also due to Vietnam's realization that the United States is an important force in maintaining a stable geopolitical environment in which even "small" countries like Vietnam are assured their independence and freedom of action. As such, Vietnam's leaders speak positively and optimistically about the future of U.S.-Vietnam ties. Differences over human rights remain, however, and lingering fears that the United States supports the overthrow of the current regime continue to complicate the relationship. China also looms as a factor coloring Hanoi's reactions to our proposals in the security realm. The Ministry of Defense is one of the ministries most suspicious of the United States and of our deepening bilateral ties.

Gradual Progress in Defense Cooperation

¶3. (SBU) Defense relations have advanced at a measured pace, but reflect the overall positive shift in the relationship. We conduct professional military exchanges with the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and PAVN officers are regular observers at annual Cobra Gold and Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercises and routinely attend U.S. Pacific Command-sponsored multilateral conferences and courses and seminars at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies. In FY08, IMET expanded mil-mil contacts through a U.S. mobile training team visit for military medical techniques training. The GVN also continues to send well-qualified candidates to English language training and English language instructor training to the Defense Language Institute. These are constructive steps, but reaching our full potential for closer cooperation in defense activities, including multilateral peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance efforts and attendance at U.S. military schools, is attainable, but will require persistence and patience.

¶4. (SBU) One operational issue affecting our ability to charge ahead with mil-mil programs is the GVN's refusal to grant a visa to our incoming Defense Attache, Colonel Patrick Reardon. In June, the GVN

acknowledged Colonel Reardon's renunciation of his Vietnamese citizenship, but ongoing debate between and within the Ministries of Defense, Public Security and Foreign Affairs appear to have stymied issuance of his visa or accreditation despite multiple high level entreaties from the Embassy. Reinforcing the message with your interlocutors that future development of our bilateral relationship depends on having an accredited defense attache would be helpful.

Defense and Security Talks

15. (SBU) The first-ever U.S.-Vietnam Political-Defense Dialogue, held on October 6 in Hanoi, covered a broad range of issues including common concerns over the role of China in the South China Sea, Vietnamese participation in peacekeeping, and cooperation in Search and Rescue, ship visits, and POW/MIA searches. The GVN raised concern about the Vietnam Human Rights Act recently put forward by Senator Boxer as "not consistent" with our current level of cooperation.

Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI)

16. (SBU) Vietnam's current seat on the UN Security Council has given significant impetus to increased engagement in international peacekeeping missions, especially those organized under UN auspices. The Joint Statement from PM Dung's June visit to Washington highlights Vietnam's agreement to participate in GPOI. Nonetheless, in order to fully engage in future peacekeeping operations the GVN will have to do much more to meet significant challenges: the lack of interoperability, the paucity of English language speakers in the military, and complications due to funding issues. Their participation in the GPOI is an important step in this direction.

17. (SBU) A Program Design & Development team from PACOM is expected
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to visit Hanoi to begin crafting a GPOI training plan tailored to Vietnam's current capabilities and priorities in February 2009 (date not yet shared with the GVN). While Vietnam's plans to send observers to the 2009 GPOI exercise, Garuda Shield, in Indonesia, we should press Vietnam to do more than observe, as they have done for the last two GPOI exercises. We are encouraging the GVN to send staff officers to actively participate in the command post exercise portion of the event and officers to observe/participate alongside trainers in the field training exercise. This would be a step up from observation, albeit a small one, and likely to be in the realm of the possible for the GVN.

Expanding U.S. Naval Ship Visits

18. (SBU) Since 2003, U.S. Navy ships have made six port visits to Vietnam, including most recently an October 2008 visit by the USS Mustin at Da Nang port. In June 2008, Vietnam participated in the Pacific Partnership mission of the USNS Mercy. While we have regularized our SOP for regular ship visits over recent years, the GVN remains firm in limiting the frequency of port visits by U.S. Navy vessels to one a year, pleading lack of capacity to handle more. This restriction is also frequently cited as being consistent with GVN laws that regulate visits by foreign warships; however, some other nations conduct more frequent port visits.

19. (SBU) While it may be unproductive to demand more frequent port calls, we still seek to persuade the GVN to permit more frequent access for limited, technical calls (i.e., for refueling and replenishment). The MOD is also reluctant to take on negotiation of an Acquisition Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA), stating that it requires more time to study this agreement because of "disparities" in our two defense systems. Progress on each of these efforts would support our overall goal of increasing routine access for U.S. naval vessels at Vietnam's ports, while maintaining the pace of military contacts at a level comfortable for the GVN.

110. (SBU) We also hope to reverse the PAVN leadership's reluctance to participate in distinguished visitor fly-outs to U.S. Navy

vessels transiting the South China Sea. To date, these have been rebuffed due to concerns over the "appearance of Vietnam's participation in joint exercises with the United States."

Search and Rescue, Humanitarian Assistance

¶11. (SBU) The MOD has expressed a strong desire to begin preparations for a joint Search and Rescue exercise, but notes that information sharing and U.S. observance of Vietnamese SAR exercises were necessary first steps. Vietnam also seeks information sharing on storm, earthquake and tsunami prediction, as well as a study on the impact of rising sea levels. The Pacific Angel program could also provide medical cooperation similar to Pacific Partnership, but using aircraft vice ships for transport.

Counterterrorism

¶12. (SBU) Vietnam says the right things about the threat of global terrorism and has participated with us in modest cooperative activities. The USG funds Vietnamese participation in counterterrorism-related training at the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in Bangkok, and through military-to-military exchanges with an emphasis on counterterrorism themes. Vietnam has signed eight out of thirteen UN terrorism conventions.

A Word on the Economy

¶13. (SBU) Vietnam's "doi moi" (renovation) program of economic reform, begun in 1986, has set the country on a successful market economy path, with an average growth rate of 7.5 percent over the past decade. The GVN focuses on exports and foreign direct investment in its drive to achieve middle-income status by 2010. The United States is currently Vietnam's largest export market and third largest overall trade partner. U.S. investors tell us the key challenges they face in Vietnam are underdeveloped infrastructure, a shortage of skilled workers and managers, and the considerable level of state participation in the economy. For its part, the GVN is grappling with issues of corruption, improving the legal environment, and implementing its WTO commitments. Vietnam's current turmoil is rooted in high inflation (27.9 percent year-on-year September), the large current account deficit, and inefficient allocation of resources, which is particularly obvious in the disproportionate amount of state resources devoted to

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powerful State Owned Enterprises (SOEs).

Human Rights Challenges

¶14. (SBU) Serious deficiencies related to human rights in Vietnam include lack of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. One of our key objectives is to end the use of catch-all "national security" provisions for the prosecution of peaceful dissent. We continue to call for the release of all prisoners of conscience, but where we see individuals expressing their political opinions, many of our government interlocutors see "lawbreakers" trying to destabilize the regime. The recent arrests and sackings of Vietnamese reporters and editors in the wake of a corruption scandal reveal the on-going battle within the GVN over the role of freedom of the press. The continued existence of groups in the United States that advocate regime change complicates human rights engagement by providing ammunition to hard-liners who want to stoke the fading paranoia that we are indeed still "the enemy." Reassuring the GVN that the USG does not support separatist groups can assist in building a better human rights dialogue based on mutual trust.

The China Factor

¶15. (SBU) While Vietnam's engagement with the United States will

continue to broaden, China necessarily constitutes Vietnam's most important strategic preoccupation. This is not to say that Vietnam is "choosing" China over the United States; Vietnam's leadership is sophisticated enough to realize that relations with China and the United States do not represent a zero sum game; it is possible to have good relations with both. Each relationship also creates challenges, however. While China constitutes a vital and necessary commercial partner and former ally, it is also perceived as a significant and frustrating constraint to Vietnam's freedom on action.

¶16. (SBU) Chinese bullying of foreign companies in an attempt to compel them to cease oil and gas exploration efforts in the South China Sea serves to remind Vietnamese officials that while the Vietnamese may not approve of all U.S. policies, the same is certainly true of Chinese actions. While progress has been made in settling the land border, there is no commonality of views on sovereignty issues regarding the South China Sea, known as the "East Sea" to the Vietnamese. Hanoi is also "riding the tiger" with regard to managing the deep negative views toward China of many Vietnamese. China is widely disliked and distrusted as a former colonial master, and Beijing's actions in the Spratlys and Paracels threaten to inflame those passions. Should Hanoi allow unconstrained protests against the Chinese, however, it would appear weak in the face of calls to action that it could not satisfy, as well as risking Beijing's anger.

Future Prospects

¶17. (SBU) The GVN recognizes the strategic importance of the United States in the region and the world, but is not shy about criticizing U.S. actions it perceives as outside the multilateral system. The GVN routinely chafes over U.S. criticism of Vietnam's record of human rights and religious freedom. Nonetheless, Vietnam's leaders are also pragmatic and recognize that Vietnam's own continued economic well-being, growth and security are, in large measure, inexorably tied to its relationship with the United States.

¶18. (SBU) Vietnam has begun to explore opportunities within regional organizations to increase joint efforts against terrorism, narcotics, maritime piracy and other issues of shared concern. Vietnam has also recently begun joint sea patrols with other neighbors in the Gulf of Thailand and has established hotlines to help facilitate coordination along sea boundaries. Nevertheless, for historic and foreign policy reasons, the GVN is generally reluctant to speak out against its "traditional friends" such as North Korea and Iran when they engage in behavior that the rest of the international community condemns.

What You Can Expect

¶19. (SBU) You can expect your interlocutors not only to be articulate and well informed, but also to speak in terms generally supportive of growth in the bilateral relationship. As noted above, lingering suspicions still exist among conservatives in leadership about the development of closer ties with the United States, but the overall tenor is one of support and interest at a measured pace that

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will not upset the GVN's calibrated attempts to maintain balance among its other regional partners. Your visit will continue to help translate those good feelings into measurable accomplishments in the defense and security relationship.

¶20. (SBU) We look forward to your visit and stand ready to do everything we can to make your time in Vietnam as productive as possible.

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